

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



# Settler-Colonial Violence and the 'Wounded Aboriginal Child': Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)

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### Abstract

Drawing on Alexis Wright's novel *The Swan Book* and Irene Watson's expansive critique of Australian law, this article locates within the settler–Australian imaginary the figure of the 'wounded Aboriginal child' as a site of contest between two rival sovereign logics: First Nations sovereignty (grounded in a spiritual connection to the land over tens of millennia) and settler sovereignty (imposed on Indigenous peoples by physical, legal and existential violence for 230 years). Through the conceptual landscape afforded by these writers, the article explores how the arenas of juvenile justice and child protection stage an occlusion of First Nations sovereignty, as a disappearing of the 'Aboriginality' of Aboriginal children under Australian settler law. Giorgio Agamben's concept of potentiality is also drawn on to analyse this sovereign difference through the figures of *Terra Nullius* and 'the child'.

### Keywords

Alexis Wright; Irene Watson; sovereignty; children; colonisation; Aboriginality.

Please cite this article as:

Faulkner J (2020) Settler-Colonial Violence and the 'Wounded Aboriginal Child': Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben). *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9(4): 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.1689>

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ISSN: 2202-8005



## Introduction

'Talk is talk. Costs nothing. Oblivia hears it everywhere now ... Oblivia hears voices all the time ...' (Wright 2013: 82).

There has been a lot of talk about Aboriginal children in Australia ... as wretched, abused, neglected ... since 'Australia' has existed, and even before Federation, extending back to the colonies. Aboriginal and other racialised children—refugee children, for instance—have furnished human scaffolds around which various national controversies flourish concerning Australian sovereignty in the shadow of *Terra Nullius*: who belongs in Australia, who can cross its borders, who must be kept out ... who is permitted to exist at all. This sovereignty-anxiety extends into the continent's interior, where Aboriginal children are rhetorically deployed against their parents and communities, who are represented as foreigners within: the un-colonised remainder of a colonised people (Moreton-Robinson 2009; Mulholland 2016; Stringer 2007; Watson 2009a).

In the long leadup to the 2007 federal election, the national broadcaster aired on one of its flagship news programs, *Lateline*, an interview with a non-Indigenous man who had purportedly been a youth worker in the remote Aboriginal community of Mutitjulu, in the Northern Territory (NT). Silhouetted and with a disguised voice, he delivered an emotional appeal, alleging a ring of paedophiles was using children as sex slaves in the community (ABC 2006). Investigative journalists later uncovered that not only had the man not been a youth worker, but he was also Assistant Secretary in the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (Graham 2017a). The government had staged this media event, using public concern for children to authorise an emergency intervention. The situation in remote NT communities called for a response, but this articulation effectively drowned out the voices of the First Nations peoples it was supposed to amplify.

Although Indigenous women had already alerted governments to violence in remote communities and its effects on children (Atkinson 1990; Robertson 2000), the problem had not previously garnered the attention of mainstream media. The causes and solutions suggested by First Nations scholars were more complex and imbricated with colonisation than media and government explanations would allow. Atkinson and Robertson documented violence in remote communities as continuous with the effects of intergenerational trauma, poverty and dispossession. Conversely, the lurid media descriptions of 2007 connected abuse to traditional Aboriginal culture and positioned white authorities as saviours. Prime Minister John Howard took up that mantle by framing the situation in the NT as a national emergency, calling it 'our [Hurricane] Katrina' and linking it to a Hobbesian state of nature (Howard 2007: 69–70). He thereby depicted remote Aboriginal-controlled communities as lawless and in need of an external imposition of law (Faulkner 2015; Mulholland 2016; Stringer 2007).<sup>2</sup>

The bipartisan passage of NT Emergency Response (NTER) legislation that followed delivered policing and medical resources to these communities at the cost of a vast array of curtailments to civil liberties, which could only be enacted by suspending the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975) (Anaya 2010). The NTER had initially proposed compulsory health checks of every child aged 0–15 years who lived in the 'prescribed areas' (land held by an Aboriginal Land Council) to determine if they had been sexually assaulted, but this was widely criticised by the medical profession. Subsequently, the health program was modified to be administered voluntarily, and the forensic component was removed (Department of Health 2011). The remainder of the legislation did not address sexual abuse, instead prohibiting adults' access to alcohol and pornography, quarantining welfare payments, removing cultural considerations from bail hearings, and reforming land tenure to disrupt cultural relationships with the land, promote private ownership and open access for resource exploitation (Howard-Wagner 2012; I. Watson 2009a; N. Watson 2009).

The figure of the 'wounded Aboriginal child' provided the rationale for these reforms and satisfied colonial fantasies of white saviourism. Indigenous children have suffered extremes of colonial violence, and, from massacres to removal and trading, have been targeted by colonial interventions into the lives of Aboriginal

peoples historically, both legal and extra-legal (Kidd 2011). However, in the spheres of politics, law and policing, 'the Aboriginal child' is abstracted from this historical context, symbolising instead the supposed abject failure of First Nations culture, the inherent criminality of the Aboriginal race and a blighted future through which Aboriginality is marginalised and will inevitably be extinguished.

This article pursues a line of thought through this ambivalent image of the 'wounded Aboriginal child', which, I argue, stands at the border of two sovereignties. *Settler-colonial* sovereignty asserts a right to claim territory by means of a founding act of violence and subsequent legal domination—all premised on the denial of the prior and enduring sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. *First Nations* sovereignty, by contrast, is grounded in an integral and timeless relationship between a people and the country to which they belong (Araluen 2019; Kwaymullina 2020; Watson 2015: 145–164). First Nations sovereignty imposes no burden of enforcement; rather, it calls upon its bearers to attend to responsibilities to land and ancestors. Thus, it is an obligations-based, 'narrative' sovereignty (Kwaymullina 2020: 7), which is connected to the ability to tell the stories and the lore of one's homelands, rather than signifying a right to use or dispose of land or a population. The representation of the wounded Aboriginal child in settler-coloniser imagination has come to mediate these rival forms of sovereignty by standing in the stead of the conflict between them, such that the very question, wherever it is posed, of First peoples' sovereignty is distracted through the purported concern for abused or neglected children.

In what follows, I draw out the sovereign difference that constitutes the ambivalent figure of the (wounded) Aboriginal child through a reading of Alexis Wright's 2013 novel *The Swan Book*, highlighting the connection of trauma to denied sovereignty embodied in the figure of the adolescent girl 'Oblivia'. Oblivia is represented as *the most* wounded child, in all the ways Australian media likes to consume 'her': she has been raped and then neglected by members of her community, rendering her an object of rescue and prey by various other actors within the novel. Wright thus interrogates the significance this figure holds for settler Australians, with an irony that undoes its rhetorical force. I consider Wright alongside Irene Watson's expansive critique of colonial law to amplify the insights of each through the other.<sup>3</sup> As Giorgio Agamben has shown, Western traditions of sovereignty are inextricably connected to violence, whether exercised or threatened. I argue, however, that Wright's representation of her protagonist's sovereign wound is not only formed by the violence of genocide and military intervention—although this certainly informs her story. For Wright, the wound that articulates the difference between sovereign logics refers to a spiritual and psychological violence: the interruption of a vital connection to land, ancestors and animals, and to climate systems whose crisis reflects that obligations are not being met. Wright allegorises the trauma of being colonised as a virus that has taken over her (the narrator's) brain, a 'nostalgia for foreign things' (Wright 2013: 3) making her '[vomit] bad histories' (Wright 2013: 1). Existing at once inside and outside white law constitutes the paradox of colonisation for First peoples exemplified by this metaphor. The wounding blow of colonisation continues to be dealt through every articulation of the state's regard for First peoples—whether elaborated as deaths in custody, NTER legislation, political representation or child protection. Each time an Indigenous person is brought under the jurisdiction of white sovereignty, 'Blak'<sup>4</sup> sovereignty is suspended, held in abeyance, survivance.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the question for Wright is how First Nations peoples can decolonise their minds, thereby activating a sovereignty maintained in reserve, *despite* the ongoing injury to country, climate and the social structures through which cultural knowledges are transmitted to the next generations. The wounded Aboriginal child is the *issue* between Indigenous and non-Indigenous sovereign claims because children bear the brunt of colonial techniques of power to this day: through carceral and child protection systems as well as media representations that galvanise interventions into their communities. Through the conceptual and imaginative landscape afforded by Wright and Watson, this article reflects on the occlusion of First peoples' sovereignty in the arenas of juvenile justice and child protection as a disappearing of the 'Aboriginality' of Aboriginal children under Australian law. Yet beneath the regard of white sovereign power, Aboriginal children also possess the potentiality for a future expression of Blak sovereignty. Thus, the difference between sovereignties is contested through the meaning of Aboriginal childhood.

The first section elaborates the difference between sovereign logics as articulated by Wright and Watson, drawing also on Agamben's critique of Western sovereignty insofar as it supports the conceptual elucidation of Wright's philosophy. Particularly, a dialogue between Wright, Watson and Agamben helps me to develop the concept of Blak sovereignty as subsisting in potential, reserved in the abandonment created by *Terra Nullius*. The second section draws out the significance of the 'wounded Aboriginal child' figure, as it is critiqued in *The Swan Book*, and argues that *Terra Nullius* is not only a Western legal principle, but is moreover a colonial project of elimination pursued through First Nations children. The final section, more speculatively, poses to settler-colonisers to reimagine the situation of Aboriginal children wounded by the coloniser's law. Rather than interpreting them as embodying neglect by their Indigenous communities, what if the cultural meaning of these children were interpreted as sites of potentiality, enabling the visibility (rather than occlusion) of Blak sovereignty? Once colonisers commit to reading for signs of sovereignty rather than of decline, only then will the decolonisation of these systems be possible.

### A Tale of Two Sovereignties

*The Swan Book* casts its reader into a world some decades hence, once global warming has intensified and the NTER has been extended to apply to Aboriginal peoples across Australia. A small number of climate refugees also gather in 'the swamp', an exceptional zone supposed to be reserved for Aboriginal communities, and which, in this shambolic postapocalyptic time is reminiscent of a 'mission' that has been abandoned by God and white 'protection'. Here, First Nations peoples bear witness to the climate devastation that is integrally related to their incapacity to fulfil obligations to land, given its appropriation under colonial rule. Wright's elaboration of this world is marked by an unsettling ambivalence. To represent the hybrid predicament into which colonisation forces First Nations peoples, she draws on literature and colonial discursive figures that demonstrate 'the virus's' hold on her as a storyteller. But she does so self-consciously, placing these techniques 'under erasure', in Derrida's sense: at once bringing to notice their contingency and acknowledging their hold on Aboriginal life.

The colonisation of the Aboriginal mind is a psycho-existential condition that begins with the interpellation of narratives the settlers imported, so they would feel at home, and which transform what 'home' had been to First Nations peoples. Narratives that constitute land as property replace Aboriginal time and ceremony and articulate a social hierarchy that excludes Indigenous peoples. *The Swan Book* brings forth a haunting perspective on imaginings of cohesive nationhood through its specific iteration of colonial tropes. For instance, Wright characterises '*Closing the Gap*'—an intention supported by governments and NGOs to bring Aboriginal peoples' life expectancies and health care into line with those of non-Indigenous Australians (Gardiner-Garden 2013)—as an assimilative take on Aboriginal advancement, which reduces Aboriginality to a form of what Agamben would call 'bare life' (Wright 2013: 49, 82, 116, 295). She cites '*Closing the Gap*' with wry derision: 'kicking Aboriginal people around the head with more and more interventionist policies that were charmingly called, *Closing the Gap*' (Wright 2013: 49).

Likewise, Wright demonstrates the absurdity of 'Native Title'—the common law doctrine that Aboriginal peoples have rights and interests to their land that stem from their traditional laws and customs—as a law that acknowledges Aboriginal sovereignty at the moment that it removes it:

They had no sooner set foot on the place, when they were told that Australians now recognised the law of Native Title after two plus centuries of illegal occupation, but unfortunately, on the day that they had left their land, their Native Title had been lost irredeemably and disappeared from the face of the planet. (Wright 2013: 10)

The paradox of Native Title is that the continuity of cultural practice and custodianship the legislation demands as a demonstration of Indigenous sovereignty is broken by colonisation—and indeed, by the very law that claims the power to bestow or deny sovereignty. Wright thus signals here the cunning of contemporary colonialism, which interpellates and implicates the subject in their colonisation through concepts supposed to ameliorate its effects.



Wright's critique recalls Tanganeald/Meintang philosopher Irene Watson's analysis of settler-colonialism as a system of law that dominates by incorporating its other and then denying the existence of whatever it cannot assimilate (thus, what might be called an excluding-incorporation). The international legal principle—or 'legal fiction' (Watson 2009b: 28)—of *Terra Nullius* determines the colonisers' understanding of land as originally empty, existing 'for their invasion and settlement' (Watson 2002: para. 21). However, *Terra Nullius* is not only a legal principle, but it also operates as a key signifier in the Australian settler-colonial imaginary, to orient an ontological schema, or order of things, according to which Australians comprehend their place in the world and attribute (or deny) value to other members of the community. According to what Patrick Wolfe calls 'the logic of elimination', *Terra Nullius* conceptually empties a land's laws and existing meanings to then empty it *physically* of its people and extract its resources through the process of settler colonisation (Watson 2015: 110–111; Wolfe 2001: 868). 'Assimilation'—which transforms the 'outside' into the 'inside', excluding difference—was once an explicit principle directing Australian government policy, but it now works more insidiously through mechanisms like 'Closing the Gap' and 'Native Title' as characterised by both Watson and Wright. Importantly, *Terra Nullius* continues to be exercised psychologically, culturally and materially through contemporary techniques such as 'Closing the Gap', 'Native Title', incarceration and child protection.

Watson illustrates this logic of excluding-incorporation through a story about a thirsty frog that drinks all the water (creeks, rivers, lakes, puddles, oceans) until nothing is left (Watson 1998: 29; Watson 2015: 16).<sup>6</sup> The other animals conspire to make the frog laugh, so that it will release the water and be brought down to size. Watson compares the frog of her people's creation story to white settler sovereignty, which greedily consumes its surroundings without heeding others' needs through an action that, indeed, renders outside and inside indistinct. Settlers first refuse to recognise Indigenous cultivation practices as labour that establishes a land claim, and thus, entitle themselves to call their 'outside' a 'state of nature' (that is, available to incorporate/appropriate). It is no accident that Prime Minister Howard referred to Aboriginal communities as existing in a state of nature ('a Hobbesian nightmare of violence, abuse and neglect') before initiating the NTER (Howard 2007: 69). This declaration conceptually empties land of intentionality, laws, spirits and political community. Land is conceived of as 'unclaimed' property in common, and by this reasoning, is ready to be appropriated.

At the centre of this understanding of sovereignty is violence. The modern European notions of sovereignty that informed settler-colonial claims over 'Australia' were wrought by political volatility, which was formulated to address crises of authority and kingship. The bloody English Civil War first staged this discourse. Later, to catch up with the exigencies of colonial conquest, a second theatre for the theorisation of sovereignty opened up, this time centring on land and a particular relation to it as 'territory'. As Watson argues, this 'foundational violence which established a colonial sovereignty' is internalised (incorporated) by Aboriginal communities in the form of trauma and lateral violence, thereby extending its reach.

[T]he violence of the state [...] retains its original character against Aboriginal peoples' laws and cultures. It is a colonial violence which re-enacts itself to support its claim to legitimate foundation, and the Howard government emergency measures [NTER] are such a re-enactment. (I. Watson 2009a: 48)

Settler sovereignty of the kind found in Australia is ontologically violent, repudiating as it does the very *existence* of First Nations peoples. This violence is exerted both internally and externally: rippling through First peoples' relations to one another and through the state's capacity to apply and withdraw from Indigenous peoples and their land in the everyday exercise of law.

Agamben's political philosophy summarises the deep ontological investments of Western sovereignty and its contemporary legacies. It can aid understanding of this connection between settler-colonial violence and the everyday operation of democratic institutions to further the scope of *Terra Nullius*. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben frames the question of political power and violence in terms of a more 'fundamental' *ontological* question, which may help open up one way, conceptually, for First Nations sovereignty to gain resurgence

over settler-colonial sovereignty. The question concerns the relationship between what is 'actual' and what is 'potential'. All uses of state force to maintain order, administer, punish and limit its citizens ('constituted power') appeal for their legitimacy to 'constituting power': that is, violence through which the state first originated. In terms of modal ontology, constituted power is an *actual* use of power—through which police make arrests, courts adjudicate and citizens obey—whereas constituting power forms the state's *potentiality*. It is the hypothetical 'big bang' from which emanates the logic of (colonial) sovereignty. Constituting power makes possible all 'legitimate' uses of force. However, in order to do so, it must exist autonomously of individual acts of state coercion—meaning it does not need to be exercised in order to exist. In this way, for Agamben, potentiality is also an *impotentiality*: that is, it comprises the capacities to-do and *not-to-do*. Indeed, to withhold from action is *more essential* to a potentiality than doing that to which its power refers because this ability not-to is what distinguishes potentiality from actuality (Agamben 1998: 29–33).

Just so, according to Agamben, the relation of constituting power to the citizen is more essentially a *withdrawal* of protection (an *impotentiality*) than, as the social contract myth would have it, the sovereign's granting of protection after the individual has suspended her rights. Sovereign power originates as a form of ban or banishment rather than protection. To preserve its power (not to exhaust power in the sundry manifestations of state coercion), the sovereign must remain impotential, autonomous to the *exercise* of power. Like enclosed land, the sovereign is a state of nature that must have been abandoned and then encapsulated by the juridical order *as its self-founding moment* (Agamben 1998: 35). Thus, the modern European logic of sovereignty is fundamentally organised through a series of equivocations between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, applied through prohibition and denial.

Wright's account of colonisation as a virus shows that the power of settler sovereignty over Indigenous peoples is not only its capacity to kill them, although from the colonial massacres to contemporary deaths in custody, this form of violence certainly *enforces* white sovereignty. The more ubiquitous operation of white sovereign power *includes* Aboriginal peoples within its jurisdiction to more formally expunge their specific form of life or ontological difference. As Watson writes of the Australian High Court Case *Mabo v. Queensland* (1992), recognising Native Title:

In the genocide game we may perhaps have only the choice of how we take it. We may enter the native title process and become a consenting party to the genocide, where one is stamped native or extinguished, but whatever the stamp, once in the process you are open to a determination of extinguishment at a time determined by the state. (Watson 2002: para. 34)

According to Watson, far from overturning *Terra Nullius*, 'Native Title' enacts the logic of elimination within the register of law, hailing the 'natives' consent to their own extinguishment through authenticity tests determined by the coloniser. This formal exclusion—or right of extinguishment—which the settler state claims for itself, confuses outside and inside, thus permitting an ambiguity between violence and law (constituting and constituted power) that continuously reprises the act of colonial conquest and imposition of colonial sovereignty. *Terra Nullius* in this sense forms a reserve—in Agamben's terms, an *impotentiality*—upon which white settler sovereignty continues to draw to maintain itself: the capacity not-to, to withhold or withdraw from action, which defines the difference between potentiality and actuality.

Yet, if *Terra Nullius* establishes settler sovereignty by withholding recognition of another law that it had banished and *placed in abeyance*, it may also be said to form a potentiality available to exercise obligations to land in a time to come. Set aside by the colonisers' assertions of sovereignty, Blak sovereignty was never ceded, although white law reserves the right to extinguish it at any moment. Inhering in the relationality between peoples and ecosystems, Blak sovereignty is not founded in an act of violent exclusion. Rather,

Blak sovereignty is so alien to the logic of white sovereignty that its laws and practices have resisted inclusion, to be attended unnoticed. As Ambēyaṇ man Callum Clayton-Dixon writes:

Our sovereignty has endured since the first sunrise—it cannot be handed to us or taken from us.<sup>7</sup> Aboriginal sovereignty can only be expressed or suppressed ... We ran this country once, and our sovereignty as Aboriginal people is the authority we hold to run our country again. (Clayton-Dixon 2015: 10)

Watson goes further to imagine a position that escapes settler-colonial law as the 'place we have always been', and which is indexed to the ancestors:

Those in the process [of claiming Native Title] may be fed a small price until their ultimate extinguishment. Those remaining outside the process resisting absorption into native title rules, go untitled, non-consenting and *perhaps it is only here that we have the possibility of freedom*, and like the ancestors 'myall blackfellers' we live to die outside the boundaries of the muldarbi<sup>8</sup> claimed sovereign territory. To be in *a place we have always been*, a creation of Nunga laws. (Watson 2002: para. 34, emphasis added)

Settler sovereignty is imposed without regard for the laws of the land, asserting sovereignty through the erasure of prior claims and peoples. Through the very activities that are supposed to establish that right—building, planting, clearing the land—white settlers compromise Aboriginal peoples' capacity to nourish their sovereign being. Wright's *mise en scène* for *The Swan Book* illustrates the predicament of First peoples, who live the displacement of this capacity and bear witness to its catastrophic consequences (the running dry of vast river systems and mass extinction of animals, for instance). In so witnessing, however, an *impotentiality* may be kept in reserve. In *remembering* colonial difference and resisting assimilation, a 'place we have always been' is kept in potential for the exercise of obligations to land, and Blak sovereignty remains possible.

As I elaborate in the following section, Wright's protagonist, 'Oblivia', finds within herself this reservoir or excess: a place of witnessing that defies incorporation by colonial law. She does so through a series of strategic resistances to the role white settler-colonial imagination—and law—assigns to Aboriginal childhood, as a site of a different kind of impotentiality: that is, the disappearance or withdrawal of Aboriginality. The equivocal girl-child of *The Swan Book* articulates a turning point through which First Nations sovereignty is recuperated rather than extinguished: through back-talk to the white Australian use of 'the wounded Aboriginal child'.

### *Swan Girl*

In terms of both state violence and the violence that constitutes the state, settler-colonial states are even more violent than most. This is because, in order to claim sovereignty over territory, land must first be cleared and then its original inhabitants forgotten or disavowed to produce *Terra Nullius*—so as to represent a narcissistic fantasy of peaceful settlement (Veracini 2010: 77). In contemporary Australian imagination, a colonial mythology of pioneer homesteads and blonde-haired children playing innocently in the bush or on the beach belies this history of violence. It especially denies the violence that colonisation has done historically, and continues to do, to First Nations children, and it often achieves this denial through overt expressions of moral regard for these children. Just as the institution of Residential Schools of North America was accompanied by a rhetoric of concern for the education of native children rather than the eradication of language and culture, the removal from their families of Australian Aboriginal children of mixed descent—especially racialised and sexualised girls—was rationalised in terms of moral protection (Jacobs 2005; National Inquiry 1997).

As Liz Conor (2012) argues, however, discourses and practices regarding childhood in settler-colonial settings articulate ideas about rights to ownership—or inheritance—of land. Particularly, racialised

images of Aboriginal childhood articulate the *demise* of lineage and of a race, such that representations of Aboriginal childhood are supposed to communicate the extinguishment of sovereignty through disinheritance: to enact *Terra Nullius*. *The Swan Book* dramatises how this contention between rival sovereignties is elaborated *through the bodies and minds* of First Nations children. As Honni van Rijswijk has also argued, Wright's representation of the novel's adolescent protagonist 'evokes' and 'intervenes in the archive' of the figure of the 'abused Aboriginal child' of the NTER. In this novel as well as *Carpentaria* (Wright 2006), Wright sets up a 'counter-imaginary' with which to reappropriate this figure and challenge coloniser representations of Aboriginality more broadly (van Rijswijk 2014: 126). Oblivion Ethylene—or simply 'Oblivia'—bears within her name the burden of settler Australians' forced amnesia and attempts to erase Aboriginal history and existence through management of the lives and images of Aboriginal children. She is depicted all the more poignantly as a perennial child: the *homo sacer* of an Aboriginality already deprived of its form of life through colonisation and thus infantilised, dehumanised and rendered unprotectable (Rollo 2018a, 2018b).

Oblivia's personal history renders her liable to be appropriated to the 'suffering Aboriginal child' trope that is a mainstay of the settler-colonial social imaginary. Having been gang-raped by (Aboriginal) youths in her community, Oblivia is sealed into a tree and forgotten for ten years. During this time, she silently and unconsciously absorbs the lore of her country—'old ghost language'—which is whispered to her by the 'ancient river gum' in which she had taken refuge (Wright 2013: 8). The shame of her rape, her confinement in the tree and her subsequent cohabitation with her 'white rescuer', 'Bella Donna', all separate her from the community and invest her with the significances that have historically provided colonisers with an alibi to intervene in First Nations life. Oblivia's abuse, seclusion and manner of acquiring knowledge—through an unmediated relationship to nature rather than social transmission—alienate her. Otherworldly and ambiguously sacred, she is at once polluting and impossibly pure.

All children in living memory of the lake people's history, and regardless of the Army intervening in their parenthood, were deeply loved by their families, until this girl came along who was so different to any child ever born in their world, it made everyone think about why Oblivia had been born at all after this dumb girl was dragged out of the eucalyptus tree by old Bella Donna after years—a decade of being missing—and who disowned her people by acting as though she had by-passed human history, by being directly descended from their ancestral tree. (Wright 2013: 11)

Through this characterisation, Wright speaks to the ambivalent status of the Aboriginal child in contemporary Australian popular culture and society, who is represented at once as victim and offender, abused and seductress, both reminder and redeemer of white guilt. The Aboriginal child represents to settler-colonial imagination an ambiguity regarding the very existence of Aboriginal peoples and the settler-colonial presence in Australia. Children of mixed descent (rendered in colonial language according to blood quantum as 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'quadroon' etc.) represent to the colonial mindset an antinomy of belonging: are they white or black? At what point in the dilution of 'blood' does Aboriginality disappear? Who do these children belong to? Who is responsible for them? And what of the coloniser's status here if new generations identifying as Aboriginal continue to emerge?

Screening this Australian anxiety is the representation of Aboriginal children as a new beginning and blank slate: the innocent face of an Indigeneity that otherwise appears within colonial imagination as menacing. Regarding children, settler-colonisers are able to feel benign concerning the circumstances that produce the colonial present. By abstracting Aboriginal children from colonial history, they are rendered easier to contemplate, interact with and manage than the adults with whom they share that history. However, by the forgetting enacted through their image, First Nations children are thus also reduced to a function as ever-renewable sites of colonisation. Represented almost always through the prism of a suffering that is notionally disconnected from the intergenerational effects of colonisation, Aboriginal children are thus positioned as in need of (white) rescue.



This renders them effectively as targets of colonial power and as sites for the production of *Terra Nullius*. The history of removing light-skinned Aboriginal children, under the auspices of Aboriginal Protection Acts in the various states, was a key pillar in a strategy to assimilate First Nations peoples biologically and culturally within the lower rungs of white Australian society from the mid-19th century to the late 20th century in some states. Historically, the rhetoric surrounding removal is ambivalent, citing humanitarianism as a motivation. However, as Watson puts it:

... while it might be said that assimilation was carried out without evil intent—as the court decided in *Kruger*, and that the forced removal of children was done in their ‘best interests’—the effect of that ‘caring’ imposed on the First Nations communities was the genocidal removal of children. (Watson 2015: 146)

Today, Aboriginal organisations, such as Grandmothers Against Removals (GMAR 2018) and SNAICC—National Voice for Our Children, warn of another Stolen Generation as more Aboriginal children than ever in Australia’s history are being removed into the foster and out-of-home care systems (SNAICC 2018; 2019). A child-protection-to-prison pathway extends the state’s intervention in Aboriginal children’s lives into adulthood (National Inquiry 1997; AIHW 2017). It is widely recognised that First Nations children are also over-represented in the juvenile justice system. For instance, at June 2018 *all* incarcerated children in the NT were Aboriginal (Allam 2018a), and there have been prominent cases of criminalised Indigenous children killed in police pursuit<sup>9</sup> and tortured in custody.<sup>10</sup> Along with the cultural genocide that is enacted through institutionalisation, in all three systems, children’s Aboriginality is frequently obscured, denied or ignored. As the independent review into Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in New South Wales, conducted by Professor Megan Davis, outlines, failure to apply the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, to place children with kin or community members,<sup>11</sup> is frequently due to carelessness in identifying children as Aboriginal (Davis 2019: 258–264). Perhaps this is in part because of the imposts and obligations that accrue to authorities once a child is identified as Aboriginal, following policy recommendations emerging from successive inquiries and royal commissions. Systemic racism connected to previous policies of controlled miscegenation (‘breeding out the colour’) is sometimes at play in the failure to identify children as Aboriginal, where government workers index Aboriginality to skin colour (Valentine and Gray 2006: 539). In any case, children and their parents frequently must fight for Aboriginality to be acknowledged in these circumstances, and this constitutes a further dimension of colonial erasure of Indigenous peoples: in this case, the erasure and/or removal of Indigeneity *from* children.

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Wright positions Oblivia initially as a site of the kind of suffering and violence that is consistent with mainstream representations of Indigenous girls, who are primarily made visible in the Australian culture system as victims of Aboriginal men or boys. Having been rendered mute by the trauma inflicted on her, Oblivia is at first not in a position to talk back against this representation. It becomes apparent, however, that she nurtures a suffering that is invested in her by the colonial situation. This is amplified by her prolonged sleep in the tree, which marks both her absentia from the passage of time and an intensive gathering of unworldly knowledge. Likewise, Oblivia absorbs others’ stories about her, living with the loquacious Bella Donna, internalising the community’s disdain for her, and later, being subject to publicity discourses when she is confined to a tower block as First Lady to Warren Finch (the first Aboriginal president of Australia).

In her capacity as silent listener and object of others’ discourse, however, Oblivia actively *bears witness* to colonisation and is not only afflicted by it, but it also invests her with a power of knowing and eventually a power to act. In the first place, Oblivia assiduously and critically curates the stories that pass into her consciousness, finding sustenance from them where she can and resisting their attempts to circumscribe her. The image of the virus with which Wright allegorises colonialism characterises Oblivia’s journey. Subjected to the delirium of endless chatter, she eclectically incorporates these discourses to bolster her

immunity. She undergoes colonisers' projections upon her *qua* 'Indigenous girl-child'—as abandoned, neglected, abused or delinquent—each of which would render her available to discrete modes of state intervention. Yet Oblivia also takes refuge in the impenetrability that allows her to be a perfect screen for others' projections, others' stories about her. She bides her time in a play of madness, to find her own place—her own sovereignty—with respect to the conflicts to which she bears witness. Oblivia's taciturn refusal to accede to others' expectations cultivates within her psyche a 'possibility of freedom', a place ('we have always been') of safekeeping against extinguishment (Watson 2002: para. 34).

Significant to this development of a reserve is the place Oblivia makes within herself for a swan. The black swan arrives at the swamp with her bevy after having been driven from her own country by drought. The swan has a signal role in Oblivia's growth, guiding her to maintain her distance from those who would use her along her journey. Wright heralds this role obliquely, referencing the red dust storm on which the bevy came: 'Oblivia remembered thinking that dust had a way of displacing destiny the first time she saw a swan' (Wright 2013: 13). There is a double displacement here, as Wright asks the reader to imagine her protagonist in a future already past, looking back to this moment once destiny has taken its course. This unusual construction refers us to the dual temporality of colonised Australia's present: its pretension to be 'post' colonial together with the coexistence of rival temporalities and sovereignties. It also signals to the divergent paths that might be taken by First peoples. As Watson (2015: 147) writes in response to the suggestion that First peoples should 'get over' colonialism, 'assimilation is the death of the native':

[I]f there is another way, we cannot accept this as our destination. Death cannot be our resolution, for it goes against our law ways, and as such we have an obligation to resist it. We have an obligation to throw over the discourse of death and our progress towards death, and open a new transformative space to return us to our ancient cycles of renewal, of new beginnings and of bringing the old into the new.

Similarly, the 'displacement of destiny' of Wright's text suggests a possibility of freedom emergent of resistance. For Oblivia, the swan's arrival produces an opening to another future. In this fateful moment, Oblivia is finally *seen* in her uniqueness. The swan marks her with its feather, and thus, singles her out as a fellow exile:

It was through this narrow prism of viewing something strange and unfamiliar, that the girl decided the swan wasn't an ordinary swan and had not been waylaid from its determined path. She knew as a fact that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her. (Wright 2013: 15)

Knowledge transmitted between swan and girl in mutual recognition binds them in obligation to one another. As exiles, both are positioned as witnesses: survivors who have come back from something terrible with a story they do not have the words to tell. This moment readies Oblivia for the task of telling her story and emboldens her resistance against others' narratives about her. For, while her voicelessness prepares her as a surface to be inscribed by the sundry representations of Indigenous childhood delivered by Australian media, her silence also resonates the *reverse side* of these images—the sentient, receptive, subjective side that exceeds and thwarts these representations, bearing the promise of a resurgent Indigenous sovereignty.

### **The Limbo of Childhood: Sovereignty**

During her confinement to the city apartment of new husband President Warren Finch, Oblivia is shown to the dual potentialities her life holds later when she notices herself on the television dutifully playing the part of the First Lady but with no memory of having done so. This double-self is a self-for-others to enhance Finch's reputation. He married the most damaged Aboriginal girl to garner authenticity and makes her over as his personal Pygmalion. During her banishment to his apartment, however, and when her agency seems most limited, Oblivia realises her obligation as custodian of swans. Vowing to rescue every last one,

she escapes her penthouse prison, filling (and defiling) it with the birds. She becomes a 'shepherd' to the lost children who wander the streets to repurpose significant buildings fallen into disuse (cathedrals, arcades etc.). Swan-rescuing becomes a 'street-kid game', as Oblivia recruits the children to build upon her reserves of sovereignty (Wright 2013: 250).

This scene is reminiscent of two images invoked by Agamben concerning the potentiality of children. First, we are reminded of his discussion of children's culturally allotted power as 'humanity's little scrap dealers' (Agamben 2007; Faulkner 2016). According to Agamben, at a time of cultural crisis, when objects and customary ways of life lose their meaning and force, they become available for children to rework through play. Play deactivates and purifies these things of their previous toxicity, repurposing them for a new cultural use. We may interpret Oblivia and her street kids thus as cultural transformers, finding a new use for, and investing new significance in, disused spaces and the institutions they previously housed. Where old ways are found no longer to be fit to purpose, children appear on the horizon as uniquely equipped to overhaul ways of life.

Second, this scene recalls the Catholic concept of Limbo, where unbaptised children dwell having died before knowing God, and so whom it would be immoral to punish. This space-between (good and evil; salvation and damnation ...) is usually seen as a place of abandonment to interminable boredom or meaninglessness. It reflects the place of Indigenous peoples who have been removed from land and kin, separated from language and culture; whose sovereignty is unrecognised and unfulfilled. Agamben's gloss of Limbo connects to impotentiality: it becomes a space for thinking about possibility in its purest (inactive, deactivated) form in situations of banishment (Agamben 1993, 5–11). It becomes a place of natality, where what he calls 'whatever singularities' are born. It is a place where what picks one out and makes one intelligible—the 'whatness' of a self—is determined: Oblivia's singularity as identified by her swan on that fateful day of its arrival, for instance.

Children are the inhabitants of Limbo, but the infantilisation to which Indigenous peoples are subject (through colonial modes of governance and the space of the mission) also lends itself to thinking of First Nations sovereignty through this figure. The suspension of a way of life under the 'benevolent' rule of another creates a Limbo state: a stasis in abandonment. But could this also be perceived as a place of (im)potentiality, where Blak sovereignty is maintained?

If we consider spaces like juvenile detention centres (where children, often Aboriginal, are abandoned and in some cases tortured) and the child protection system (which frequently deprives children of their Aboriginality), Limbo appears as an increasingly apt descriptor for these spaces—except for the key difference that these are punitive spaces of abandonment. Unlike the notional children whom the NTER was supposed to protect, incarcerated Aboriginal children are represented as bad seeds, 'no angels', beyond rescue. However, once the legitimacy of this punishment is questioned, we might find capacity in this Limbo. Children, both captured and abandoned by the state, are seen in security video fighting against the system that erases them—fighting for freedom. And in this they are no longer anonymous and forgotten: they are seen, and, through contemplation of the injustice of their experience, 'Australia' sees itself. Singled out in their isolation, where they are not supposed to exist, a capacity is thus preserved and even nurtured. Once brought into the light through a reciprocal act of witnessing, this Limbo space resonates the notes of unclaimed history. And in that void, a sovereignty, never ceded, presses itself into intelligibility.

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Oblivia realises this capacity within the constraint of obligation to her swan and within what appears as the barest relation to survival. Late in the novel, having escaped into the desert, when Oblivia is at her weakest, Old Lady Drought implores her not to give up on the last dying swan:

... The drought woman told her of all people, *You have to carry the swan*. Oblivia thought she was being put upon by some proper big dependency that was now far too much for her, and she snapped at the swan, *That was the big problem about being a survivor swan—outliving your life span, getting too fond of gobbling up the muck in the sewage ponds of life, and not laying down and dying like the others*. (Wright 2013: 331–332, emphasis in original)

She reluctantly accepts the burdens and obligations that constitute her sovereignty, which waits in abeyance having endured *Terra Nullius*. As Watson argues in *Raw Law*, a future for First Nations lies in challenging and rejecting narratives about loss, damage and decimation. Indigenous ways persist, and lands and animals continue to call upon them and confer authority:

Survival is no longer exclusively a question for we Nungas; it is a question for all humanity, of how human beings will co-exist with each other and within the natural world. Global colonialism has damaged our relationships with the natural world; many First Nations Peoples have no land base and live within cities, suburbs and country towns. However, while many First Nations are without physical control over our territories we still hold the law, the stories and the songs for country. And while some of our territories have been damaged, the law continues to live in those places because of the 'Dreaming that will never be taken away'. (Watson 2015: 145–146)

### Conclusion: Swan Country

At the novel's end, we are left in Swan Country, Oblivia's abandoned homeland: a space of discomfiting ambiguity. Myna birds continue to speak in traditional language, 'little linguists with yellow beaks [singing] song about salvaging and saving things ...' But they do so mechanically, meaninglessly 'rearranging sound in a jibber-jabbering loudness' (Wright 2013: 329), like Agamben's scrap-dealing children. Oblivia holds the last swan to her, which, after losing its flock, had 'found being alone unbearable' (Wright 2013: 332). But she is left in a difficult relation of resentful identification with the lost swan. Her own survival is tenuous and marginal, as she wanders the dried-up swamp lonely as a spectre and fixed in adolescence. She remains marked by colonial violence, shunned by her people and continues silently to tell herself 'stories of extinction' (Wright 2013: 333). Implied by Wright's emphasis on storytelling as an apprehension of sovereignty, however, is the potential existence of interlocutors; partners in conversation who may not presently be available but are called into existence by her address, like the street children of her story—and perhaps also evidenced by this exchange between her ideas and those of Watson and Agamben that is staged here.

The imaginary world Wright weaves for Oblivia's quest borrows from European folklore, reworking the significances of its key figures to trick the virus that has infected her into thinking she wants what *it* wants. Being sick with the virus gives her a second sight: a vision from below or double-consciousness. She hides within the shadows cast by 'foreign things' to impersonate being colonised, and thereby, keep something of herself in reserve. This dissimulation is a strategy 'to regain sovereignty over [her] own brain' (Wright 2013: 4). It also expresses an agency that subverts the premise of white sovereignty: *Terra Nullius*, the assertion that nothing exists outside its jurisdiction.

Oblivia is named for the sovereignty-founding 'oblivion' that marks her as subject to colonial violence. Like the many Aboriginal children whom she 'represents'—children whose Aboriginal identity is obscured and disappeared within the systems that capture them—Oblivia supposedly marks a forgetting that Aboriginal peoples were ever on this continent. In this capacity, she cannot petition the government to recognise her presence under Native Title. In any case, she would refuse to subject herself to the tests of authentication demanded by the settler-colonial system—a system that measures Aboriginality in parts of blood or tone of skin, and demands of 'real Aborigines' that in effect they should never have been colonised (Watson 2009a: 48–50). This connects her to the ancestors Watson identifies as keepers of the reserve of a sovereignty that cannot be incorporated by settler-colonial law. As non-consenting pariah, Oblivia



occupies the space that Watson writes, 'we have always been'—a place of a possible freedom that cannot be imagined through assimilative notions such as 'reconciliation' or 'Close the Gap'. Through Oblivia's story, Wright imagines, and thereby makes possible, a space outside colonisation—the 'impotential' space of an obligations-based First Nations sovereignty, held in reserve as what is excluded by white sovereign power.

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<sup>2</sup> As the NT is a territory rather than a state, the normal federal limits to Commonwealth government power do not apply. It also has a relatively high Indigenous population.

<sup>3</sup> Other articles recognise the importance of both Wright and Watson, but do not bring them into dialogue with each other (Harris 2018; Ravenscroft 2018; Rijswijk 2014). My intention is to demonstrate a deeper connection between their ideas, regarding the survivance of First Nations, where that sovereignty is not recognised by settler-colonial cultural systems.

<sup>4</sup> 'Blak' refers to the political movement of Indigenous peoples to take back language from the coloniser as an expression of power, differentiating their being from that imposed by the coloniser as the racialised 'black'. See <https://sites.google.com/site/australianblakhistormonth/extra-credit>

<sup>5</sup> 'Survivance' is a term first used in the context of Indigenous studies by Anishinaabe man Gerald Vizenor to refer to the survival of Indigenous peoples in resistance against colonisation.

<sup>6</sup> The story of the thirsty frog is popularly known as 'Tiddalik' to non-Indigenous audiences. This name belongs to the Gunai/Kurnai People of what is now known as South Gippsland, Victoria but appears in multiple nations across the continent under other names (Morton 2006).

<sup>7</sup> While the claim that Blak sovereignty exists since the first sunrise is seen as strategic or purely political (just as are *all* sovereign claims to an extent), it is important to recognise that this grounding of sovereignty in belonging to the land is integral to a way of being and a lifeworld of epistemologies and practices that exists without reference to European political ontology. In that context, the grounding of Blak sovereignty in terms of a lineage stretching all the way back to the creative spirits should be accepted at face value if it is to own its requisite force. Equally, this is not equivalent to a race-based 'blood and soil' claim; it refers to a way of relating to human and non-human others through time and the obligations these relationships generate.

<sup>8</sup> 'Muldarbi' is the name for a demon spirit, which Watson attributes throughout her work to the coloniser (Watson 1998, 2002, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Elijah Doughty was run over and killed with impunity by a citizen who claimed Doughty had stolen his motorcycle (Graham 2017b). Two Perth boys were killed in pursuit by police when they were driven into the Swan River. Police pursued them because they were reported to have jumped fences (Allam 2018b). TJ Hickey was killed in a police pursuit in Redfern in 2004 (Jenkins 2020).

<sup>10</sup> The mistreatment of incarcerated children in the NT became a scandal when it aired on *Four Corners* on 25 July 2016. See <https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/australias-shame-promo/7649462>

<sup>11</sup> As with other settler-colonial jurisdictions such as Canada and the United States, in Australia the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle guides government agencies to place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children whom a court determines cannot remain with their parents first with kin, or with Aboriginal members of their community, or with an Aboriginal carer, before placing them in non-Indigenous care. Although this principle has been adopted by all jurisdictions in Australia in both legislation and policy, around 35 per cent of children identified as Aboriginal are placed in non-Indigenous care (AIFS 2019).

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